

# INDIA'S WILDLIFE HISTORY

by Mahesh Rangarajan. 2001.

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The decline of populations of large game in India that started from the days of the British Raj, through a combination of habitat destruction and hunting, for sport or simply out of fear, is now so well documented that most discussions on its history tend to be somewhat sterile.

Nonetheless, Mahesh Rangarajan, arguably India's finest scholar in the history of conservation, presents the subject in a very readable style. Mahesh is no stranger to the subject, and has also authored works on the people – wildlife conflict (*Fencing the Forest* and *Towards Coexistence*;

*People, Parks and Wildlife*) and compiled a series on the anthology of Indian wildlife (*Oxford Anthology of Indian Wildlife*). This particular work, published jointly by the Ranthambhore Foundation, which strives to save tigers and their habitats in Ranthambhore and elsewhere in India, opens with a Foreword by the Foundation's own Valmik Thapar, tigerman extraordinaire and noted conservationist.

*India's Wildlife History* includes chapters dedicated to descriptions of the forests and fields in ancient India, as depicted in literary works such as the *Ramayana* and *Arthashastra*, and goes on to describe the wildernesses maintained by the Mughals, primarily for supporting populations of game animals. To bring joy to herpetologists, part of a chapter is on venomous snakes (but clubbed with other 'dangerous beasts'). To contrast these chapters are those on indigenous efforts to protect either individual species (e.g., storks and antelopes) or forests (as sacred groves), the transition from hunting to photography and on independent India's new naturalists and writers (including Corbett, Champion, Ali, Gee and Krishnan). Project Tiger is dealt with in detail, as are events in its aftermath, and finally, the current crisis of both poaching for big bucks as well as human – large mammal conflict. A little bit here on the loss of biodiversity itself, its

causes and presumed effects, as the country's arable regions are brought under the plow, and encroachments eat into protected areas, would have been relevant, in my opinion. References to archaeological evidence for early faunal collapse, presumably a result of change of climate, makes for interesting reading, as do references to elephants ('the most remarkable animal used in war') and their acquisition by the Mauryas.

What makes the writing so refreshing is its scholarship and width of knowledge. Mahesh is equally likely to quote from ancient Indian texts and obscure Persian poetry, as he is from the pages of the 'Big Game' literature and from the pages of the hallowed Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society. And not to mention, the archives and other official records, from which Mahesh has the gift to ferret out pertinent information.

If Mahesh permits me to be a bit critical (surely, since we are friends from the Oxford days, discussing much wildlife and history while punting down the Isis, fellows of ill-repute, us), the title of the work is a bit confusing: it can equally well apply to a work on biogeography – the geographical distribution of plants and animals on earth, of which historical biogeography is an aspect of "wildlife history". Or perhaps the work can even be mistaken for a historical account of studies of wildlife. I suppose 'wildlife' itself is a rather imprecise word whose usage is currently on the decline in favour of 'biodiversity', another new word for what old timers referred to as good old Mother Nature!

As the Foreword says, this volume had been missing from our shelves. I wish the author and publisher would now consider publishing a larger work, carrying profuse illustrations in colour, depicting both our rich history of big game hunting and conservation. And how about another on the history of biodiversity conservation itself, beyond cheetahs and tigers and lions and even snakes, gleaned from readings of ancient Indian texts? Conservation in the past has often entailed exclusion of local people, and for success has to look at more participation and resource sharing.

In summary, Mahesh, not a bad job for a historian!

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